

AN ETHICAL POPULISM IN EDUCATION STRUGGLES: THE MEDIA CAMPAIGNS OF THE NZEI TEACHER UNION

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ABSTRACT While commonly referred to in the pejorative register due to its recent links with the far-right, the work of Ernesto Laclau and his followers has sought to re-claim populism for the progressive left. Rather than necessarily the site of an irrational and reactionary politics, Laclau conceived populism as an ‘articulatory logic’ which can potentially carry any ideology. This paper argues, through a discussion of recent media campaigns of the NZEI teacher union, that populism is a potentially useful strategy for leftist educational activists. Through clearly marking the boundaries between neoliberalism and a progressive educational ethos, the logic brings together teachers, parents and the wider public around shared cultural values. While there are ethical issues associated with a strategy which encourages simplification and the exclusion of an Other, I argue that these concerns can be mitigated against through the grounding of campaigns in widely shared ethical principles and the provision of accessible online spaces. Further, there is no ‘who’ which is excluded, but a ‘what’: a globally hegemonic system which itself has inflicted much social harm.

KEYWORDS Teacher unions, New Zealand, Laclau, populism, ethics

Introduction

In 2012 New Zealand’s primary schooling teacher union, the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) launched the double-sided campaign *Stand Up For Kids: Protect Our Schools/Fight the GERM*. Rather than being directed against a specific government policy or issue, *SUFK/GERM* pitted two opposed visions for the future of education against each other (NZEI, 2013). On one side were the defenders of New Zealand’s ‘world class’, ‘quality and equitable public education system’. On the other, the New

Zealand Government sought to ‘create a crisis in education and impose a business model’ (NZEI, 2013, n.p.), informed by the Global Education Reform Movement, or GERM. The term GERM was coined by the Finnish education academic Pasi Sahlberg (2013), who argued that it represents an ‘educational reform orthodoxy’ (n.p.), particularly within Anglophone nations where neoliberal rationalities have become most ingrained. Within this orthodoxy, education is primarily viewed in the narrow terms of enabling economic productivity and competitiveness.

In this paper, I argue for a conceptualisation of populism which emancipates the word from its recent connections with right-wing, reactionary political movements. In doing so it becomes a potentially useful discursive strategy which can be deployed by educational activists in order to unite dispersed demands around education and other linked social justice issues. This article is structured by way of three main sections. Firstly, I locate this study within the current context of teacher union resistance to global neoliberal education reform. After which I provide a conceptual framework for what I refer to as ethical populism. In the empirical section I analyse selected media from NZEI campaigns to show the evolutionary development of an *ethical populism*.

Teacher Union Media Activism: A context

As outlined by Sahlberg (2011, 2013), the GERM prioritises top-down system-change models which draw from the private sector approach to education as a profit-making business. It assumes teachers as individuals motivated only by self-interest, and who therefore need to be rendered more open to competition, standardisation, accountability and consumer choice, in order to prevent them from excluding the interests of students and parents (see Moe, 2011 for a particularly indicative example of this logic). Teachers’ professional ethics and knowledges are marginalised, as the learning process becomes reduced to the instrumental transmission of skills between ‘providers’ and ‘consumers’ (Codd, 2005). Particularly opposed and discounted in this neoliberal reconfiguration of the teacher-student relation are feminist care ethics, which, through their focus on teachers supporting each other, their communities, and the ‘emotional and physical well-being of students’ (Brickner, 2016, p. 18), are inherently anti-competitive and de-individualizing.

Also directly opposed to the individualising GERM logic are teacher unions, which are organised around the principle of collective organization in order to protect collective interests (Bascia, 2015). Hence, teacher unions have come under sustained attack with the global ascendancy of a neoliberal, marketized conception of education (Compton and Weiner, 2008). Despite such attacks, teacher unions have retained strong memberships and politicized constituencies (Bascia, 2015; Compton and Weiner, 2008; Stevenson and Mercer, 2015). However, certain issues work to constrain this undoubted political potential. For example, in the well-documented US context, teacher unions have been constrained by hierarchical, bureaucratic structures, a focus on influencing the Democratic Party and winning material gains for the membership (Uetrict 2014; Weiner, 2012). Weiner (2012, n.p.) coins this model ‘business unionism’, ‘a totally bureaucratic approach’ averse to rocking the boat politically, thus encouraging ‘member passivity’, thereby reducing teachers’ capacity to resist the GERM agenda. Further, union school site presence is eroded as power becomes centralised, leading to a growing disconnect with prescient social justice issues within their communities (Uetrict, 2014; Weiner, 2012). This has contributed to feelings of alienation from their unions (Brickner, 2016; Popiel, 2015), meaning teachers are drawn to digital platforms to articulate their ethical positions on education policy in more atomised, individualised modes (Berkovich, 2011; Brickner, 2016).

However, against this depoliticising and individualising trend, recently there have been encouraging moves towards a social movement teacher unionism, which challenges the dominance of the business model (Stevenson and Mercer, 2015; Weiner, 2012, 2015). Unions which have employed this model in order to successfully push back against neoliberal education reforms include the British Columbian Teachers Federation (Ewbank, 2015; Poole, 2007, 2015), the Chicago Teacher Union (Gutstein and Lipman, 2013; Meiners and Quinn, 2016; Uetrict, 2014) and the National Union of Teachers in England (Murch, 2008; Stevenson and Mercer, 2015). Their campaigns have resisted public school closures, mass firings of teachers, public cuts to education and the privatization of schools through the charter school model.

Through such campaigns, unions have drawn clear lines between their vision for public education and the policy preferences of neoliberal market reformers. They also represent new ways of doing educational politics, emphasising the formation of strong bonds between their memberships, parents and the wider public, through the articulation of a shared ethical culture, which rejects neoliberal individualism (see Meiners and Quinn, 2016). Social movement teacher unions can also be distinguished by their moves towards developing less hierarchical and more community-based and flexible forms of organizing (Popiel, 2015; Weiner 2013), together with the making of new alliances with other social justice advocacy groups (Eidelson and Jaffe, 2013). Interested readers are referred to one of the best-documented transitions from business to social movement unionism in the story of how the Chicago Teachers Union was taken over by a Caucus of Rank-and File Educators (CORE). Soon afterwards, CORE forced Chicago's city government to back down on implementing massive school closures in vulnerable communities, following the first teacher's strike in a generation (Gutstein and Lipman, 2013; Uetricht, 2014; Meiners and Quinn, 2016).

In summary, progressive union movements in Anglophone countries face a number of challenges to their ethical legitimacy and political potential. Rather than operating as a space for the elevation of feminist care ethics into a political platform for change, business unionism has all too often reproduced the individualised and self-interested model of teaching inherent in the GERM. However, I argue that social movement teacher unionism has the potential to both challenge neoliberal hegemony and offer a platform for the articulation of an alternative, imagined through the collective ethics of teachers and their communities. In the following section I offer a conceptual framework, based on the work of Ernesto Laclau, which theorises how this can be engendered through media campaigns.

Ethical populism: A conceptual framework

This section argues that a way that teacher unions can become a political platform for the articulation of collective ethics, and thus potentially achieve the successes of unions such as the CTU, is populism. This may seem problematic to many readers, who are wary of populism's recent associations with the right

of the political spectrum. Indeed, research on the intersections of the media, populism, and education has tended to focus on its right-wing variants, in particular the far-right (Wodak, KhosraviNik, and Mral, 2013), and the dangers this poses to liberal democratic processes (Mazzoleni, 2007), as well as the democratic sensibilities of young people (Ranieri, 2016). However, I argue that this body of work draws on a representation of populism as the necessary site of an irrational, extremist and superficial politics (Stavrakakis, 2014). In contrast to this view, the work of Ernesto Laclau has sought to conceive populism as an ‘articulatory logic’ (Laclau, 2005b, p. 44), and thus a neutral conduit through which *any* ideology may be carried, including leftist progressivism.

However, there are problems with applying Laclau’s theory to union practice, which include the negation of human agency and culture (Paniza, 2005; Simons, 2011), and an under emphasis on the ethical dangers of populism as a discursive strategy (Arditi, 2010; Žižek, 2006). Hence, this section, after outlining some of his key terms, attempts to integrate another area of Laclau’s theory with his theory of populism, *the ethical*, in order to mitigate against these issues and progress a model of ethical populism for teacher unionism. The key terms I am going to outline are *articulatory logic*, *demands*, *equivalences* and *ethical signifiers*.

An *articulatory logic* refers to a mode of representing society through discourse (Laclau, 2005a). A populist articulatory logic is the most political way of doing this (Thomassen, 2016), because it constructs all issues in terms of ‘us’ against ‘them’, thereby limiting the ability of a ruling regime (such as neoliberalism) to address demands on an individual basis. At the other end of the scale is the institutionalist articulatory logic, which places emphasis on the desirability of consensus and the modulation of antagonisms (Laclau, 2005b).

The difference between the two logics can be illustrated through reconsidering the contrast between business and social movement unionism. The former assumes that teacher requests for the foregrounding of care ethics in schools ‘can be satisfied in a non-antagonistic, administrative way’ (Laclau, 2005b, p. 36). A technocratic, pragmatic approach holds sway, in which claims are dealt with on an individual basis as requests

and are thus commonly prevented from progressing to the more politically antagonistic and collective level of *demands* (2005a, pp. 74-5). The latter, by contrast, would seek to find *equivalences* between those claims and others, such as equality, democratic empowerment and a collaborative working environment, turning them into a collection of demands. Once these equivalences are forged, the institutional system finds it increasingly difficult to absorb them on an individual basis as claims, meaning they become perceived as denied demands. Hence, following the accrual of this critical mass, we see the increasing dominance of the more polarising, populist articulatory logic.

This equivalential collection of demands finds unity at one level through the commonality of being denied. However, what unites them more concretely is the naming of an antagonist, ‘an unresponsive power’ (Laclau, 2005a, p. 86) which is constructed as continuously failing (or even staunchly refusing) to address them. Hence, equivalences are also made between signifiers which represent that antagonist, and is only through reference to this excluded Other that a collective populist identity is able to emerge. This is why the antagonist is termed a ‘constitutive outside’ (Mouffe, 2005), because it is the act of symbolic expulsion itself which constitutes the inside, collective identity (Szkudlarek, 2016).

What Paniza (2005) highlights, however, is that what is missing from Laclau’s framework is an account of human agency and strategy. Paniza stresses that demands must be formulated by human actors, and do not just result spontaneously from denied claims. In other words, demands are constituted within a shared culture with a strong sense of collective ethics, such as the profession of teaching. As will become clear below and in the following discussion of the NZEI’s campaigns, I argue that an important aspect for the legitimacy of social movement demands is that they emerge within, and thus tap into, the pre-existing collective ethics of a group.

This negation of culture from Laclau’s model has been critiqued elsewhere (see Simons, 2011), and brings us to the crux of my argument here. Laclau’s model works very well in theory, but has some ethical dangers attached for the practice of leftist educational movements. Primary amongst these is the previously mentioned construction of an excluded Other, who

represents everything that 'we' are not. As has been well noted (see Žižek, 2006), this scapegoating function, in particular when directed towards vulnerable groups, is at best ethically questionable and at worst can lead to ethnic cleansing.

However, the division of the political terrain into terms of 'them' against 'us' also leads to another ethical hazard. As Arditì (2010) has recognised, there is a danger that the application of Laclau's populist discursive strategy could lead to a degree of misperception, whereby the politicized activist sees all issues in terms of this stark black and white divide, making shades of grey and thus compromise increasingly difficult. As Arditì (2010) puts it, it becomes a precondition of the populist movement that 'something fundamental escapes them [the activist]' (p. 496), meaning they can be manipulated and/or deceived by the leader/theorist, reducing the ability of teacher unions to move towards more democratic and less hierarchical structures.

However, I argue that these dangers can be mitigated against for the unionist by integrating another branch of Laclau's (2000, 2014) theory: *the ethical*, which was unfortunately never incorporated into his theory of populism before his untimely death in 2014. Laclau theorised the ethical as political because it is on the opposite pole to the normative, in a similar way to populism and institutionalism. While the normative represents the gradual build-up of agreed procedures, the ethical represents their pure negation, by way of reference to universal values (Carusi, 2017). These values become articulated through *ethical signifiers*, such as justice and authenticity, which point to a vision of a fully ethical society, one that is currently denied by the normative structure.

However, those ethical signifiers cannot fully capture the ethical values positively. This is because there is no set agreement on what a fully just or fully authentic society looks like; we only collectively know what constitutes injustice and inauthenticity. Slightly paradoxically, is their very indistinctness, or inability to be represented positively, which increases the political potential of these signifiers. Because they can never be fully captured within normative structures, they retain an almost mystical, ephemeral nature. When articulated through social movement discourse they then imbue action with a sense of purpose and rightness, lifting political demands above the often mundane,

physical world of organising, to the metaphysical realm of ideals and values.

As I argue in the below analysis section, if those ethical signifiers also represent the history and traditions of a professional culture such as teaching, it can democratically ground a movement, providing legitimising justification for political demands and countering the more ethically questionable elements of populism. This is particularly important for teacher union movements, where campaigns need to make sure that they do not lose touch with the relational care ethics which ground teaching (Popiel, 2015). As I will outline, further mitigation can be achieved through the provision of accessible online spaces and the direction of antagonisms towards a globally hegemonic system. Firstly however, I wish to provide the reader with some context on the recent educational context in Aotearoa New Zealand and the NZEI union.

Background on the New Zealand educational context and the NZEI union

In November 2008 the centre-right National Party came to power in New Zealand and quickly implemented their flagship National Standards policy. The policy purported to increase school accountability and transparency by ensuring that every student from year 1 to 8 would be assigned one of four grades (above to well below) for reading, writing and maths, by way of an Overall Teacher Judgment (OTJ), based on existing assessments (O'Neill, 2014). These results would be issued to parents by way of bi-annual reports. School-level results would also be published online which allowed newspapers to convert the data into league-tables to rank and compare schools. The process of assigning grades did not account for socio-economic disadvantage, which further increased pressure on academically low-performing cash-strapped schools in deprived communities (Thrupp and White, 2013). Objections raised by unions and academics that the tables would reproduce and reinforce inequalities were positioned as 'anti-transparency' by government and the media (Salter, 2018).

Together with being marginalised by hostile government and media articulations around the policy, there was a growing feeling of disempowerment amongst teachers and their union (Thrupp and Easter, 2012). The development of the National

Standards was marked by a rushed, behind closed doors process and sector 'consultation' amounted to a token gesture (Thrupp and Easter, 2012). As I outline below, the recognition that the Government were not going to address their concerns, or heed their demands for a small-scale trial, contributed to a shift in the NZEI's goals and strategies.

The NZEI was founded in 1883 following the implementation of a national education system for the first time in New Zealand (Simmonds, 1983). The union was born out of the pragmatic requirement for the communication of geographically dispersed, isolated teachers' concerns, as one united voice to central government, in order to influence policy. Hence, prior to the National Standards policy, the NZEI had a long-embedded tradition of 'promoting policy change within education through negotiation and discussion' (Gordon, 1992, p. 25), rather than populism or political antagonism.

At the same time however, the NZEI had a mission from inception of promoting 'the interests of education' (Simmonds, 1983, p. 15) within the halls of power. Over its history, this has translated into the principled promotion of the interests of teachers and children, together with what they saw as the best for a strong New Zealand education system (Simmonds, 1983). During the mid-20th Century the NZEI had been closely involved in promoting a broad, holistic curriculum, linked to social democratic values, alongside a progressive Labour government (Simmonds, 1983). By the 1970s, this contributed to New Zealand becoming world-renowned for a pedagogical approach which privileged openness, autonomy and creativity (MacDonald, 2016; Peters, Marshall, and Massey, 1994). This holistic philosophy or ethos integrated contemporary research with teacher knowledge gained in the classroom, to devise innovative curricula which sought to develop the whole child in order to benefit wider society, reduce inequality and maintain a healthy democracy (MacDonald, 2016).

However, this ethos was marginalised in the late 1980s with the onset of neoliberalisation, when New Zealand experienced the most profound and rapid changes to its economic and social infrastructure of any Western nation (Kelsey, 1995). Following the marketization of the school administrative structure in 1989, which excluded teachers from having an input into policy, the

1993 curriculum enacted a ‘technocratic ideology’ (Peters et al., 1994), reifying the diverse richness of the learning process into standardised, measurable achievement objectives. This then reduced the professionalism of teaching, by conceiving it as a technical process, simply involving the transmission of a list of skills into students (Codd, 2005). However, the 1999-2008 Labour government somewhat reversed this trend through the lengthy and inclusive consultation process around the construction of the 2007 New Zealand Curriculum, and by the final document reflecting the holistic and caring values of New Zealand’s teaching culture (see Ministry of Education, 2007).

Hence, when their recommendations concerning the National standards were ignored by the government, the union perceived these shared cultural values, embodied by an educational system they had been involved in from inception, as under threat. Hereafter, the NZEI was forced to change tactics from its traditional methods of negotiation and discussion. In late 2009, the union leadership decided, following a series of urgent meetings, to launch a systematic campaign to mobilise teacher and parent support and shift public opinion onside using a variety of communicative strategies. In the next section of this paper, I will describe and analyse the NZEI’s media campaigns between 2010 and 2013.

***Hands Up For Learning* campaign**

The *Hands Up For Learning: Trial National Standards Not Our Kids* campaign was launched shortly after the official launch of the National Standards policy in October 2009, in order to lobby the government to agree to a small-scale trial before full national implementation. The campaign included a website, videos, a petition, numerous press releases, the organisation of a cross-sector forum to discuss the policy, and the design of a campaign poster (figure 1).

Given that the mainstream media were overwhelmingly supportive of the policy (see Salter, 2018), and the government were unresponsive, the leadership team (including the elected President, the National Secretary and the Director of Communications), recognised that a media campaign aimed at getting their point across to powerful elites was not going to be enough on its own. Hence, the decision was quickly made to communicate the ethical values of the campaign to a wider

audience through a bus tour, beginning from the start of the school year in February 2010 (when the policy was due to be implemented in schools). Two busses would begin from either end of the country, visiting numerous schools and communities – with the aim to meet in Wellington in March of the same year, for the symbolic delivery of a petition to parliament, demanding that the policy be trialled.

The campaign attracted much media attention, and its direct tactics aimed more at public, than government opinion, marked a transition point between their traditional methods, to one of a campaigning, social movement union. While equivalences were being made between signifiers that represented ‘us’ and ‘them’, the populist articulatory logic seen later in the *Stand Up For Kids* campaign was not yet fully evident. Had the government agreed to a trial at this stage, the momentum behind the movement may well have dispersed, meaning the equivalential aggregation of multiple demands seen later may not have developed.

However, complicating Laclau’s model, the call for a trial can be seen as a demand already richly imbued with historical meaning, rather than simply emerging as the result of a denied claim, disconnected from cultural context. While the trial was in the process of being denied by the Government, the singular demand already represented something much more than itself, through reference to ethical signifiers, due to its emergence from within a culture. National Standard’s implementation without a trial was becoming represented as denying ethical values shared by teachers and parents, linked to the recognition of diversity and vibrancy in children. This is evidenced in the below analysis of the NZEI’s magazine *Education Aotearoa*, a video made to document the bus tour and the campaign poster.

Education Aotearoa

Education Aotearoa is a quarterly magazine which circulates both online in pdf form, and circulated in print form to schools, delivered to each of the union’s approximately 50,000 members. It includes both ‘news and views’, including feature stories and forwards by the President and the National Secretary, which often comment on the politics of education. Shortly before the bus tour, the magazine published a story entitled ‘Tension 2010 – national standards vs the curriculum’ (Clement, 2010). The article explicitly framed the debates in terms of a stark,

‘Jekyll and Hyde’ opposition between the two policies, through interviewing school principals on their opinions. While the curriculum was equivalentially linked to the ethical signifiers of community, empowerment and authenticity, National Standards was articulated with testing, prescriptive, threat, fear and league tables. Hence, the interviewed school principals’ views could be seen as representing a growing understanding in the sector that National Standards represented a return to the technocratic ideology behind the 1993 curriculum. In short, it was seen as threatening to re-reduce teaching to a routinized, technical vocation, rather than something which was creative, empowering and holistic.

Bus Tour Video

A video made shortly after the bus tour reached Parliament on 31 March 2010 documented the experiences of three teachers who participated. This two-minute video can still be viewed online on the NZEI’s heritage website (NZEI, 2010). As the bus tour moved around the country visiting schools, teachers could hitch a ride between towns and cities, increasing feelings of connectivity to the campaign. When the two busses reached Wellington from the far North and far South of the country, that feeling increased as educational activists from around New Zealand converged on Parliament to deliver the petition, covering the grounds with orange school community statements articulating communal concerns around the policy. This ‘sea of orange’ spectacle created by school community statements covering the lawn in front of parliament represented the collective educational culture, which was seen to now be symbolically colonising the halls of power.

In the video, the three teachers talk primarily about strong feelings of collectivity, rather than the instrumental goal of delivering the petition to parliament to demand the trial. In other words, what was important was that the bus tour and campaign began to ‘feel like a movement’ (Meiners and Quinn, 2016), providing a space for the mediated articulation of a culture and ethical values which are shared between teachers and the public. One teacher professed it was ‘amazing’ to be on the tour, and ‘so positive to be with other activists’, while another that the support displayed by a school hall full of signed petitions was ‘overwhelming’.

Hands Up For Learning: Trial National Standards, Not Our Kids poster

The aesthetics of this shared culture were anchored by the initial design of the poster seen in figure 1 below. As mentioned, this generated the orange theme of the campaign, which was then reproduced on the website, t-shirts, school community statements, and the tour busses themselves. This linking of a specific colour to the campaign was also a key part of the CTU's successful generation of public support in Chicago (Gutstein and Lipman, 2013), where it became a key signifier of your affiliation to a movement to wear a red t-shirt.



Figure 1: 'Hands Up For Learning: Trial National Standards, Not Our Kids' poster (reproduced with permission from the New Zealand Educational Institute collection).

However, the orange colour in figure 1 is further complemented by a diversity of colours in children, both in skin and clothing, who are holding up their hands 'for learning'. This colourful diversity is a visual signifier for New Zealand's child-centred, holistic educational culture, which celebrates creativity and human growth for the good of society and democracy, rather than only the economy. In this way, the design points

to a vision for education that had become symbolised by the 2007 curriculum, but which was being denied by an overly scientific and instrumental approach to kids, embodied in National Standards. This technocratic approach to schooling would sooner experiment on the lives of children than trial a policy, hence denying the ethics of diversity, democracy, vitality, empowerment, community and authenticity, together with feminist care ethics. The poster both constituted and reflected back a shared culture, which was having its ethics denied by the Other: the neoliberal, GERM agenda.

***Stand Up For Kids* campaign**

The *Stand Up For Kids, Protect Our Schools/Fight the GERM* campaign was launched at the NZEI's annual conference in September 2012, and became strategically centred on national rallies in April 2013. The campaign was motivated by the introduction of two more highly controversial policies by the government: charter schools and an increase in class sizes, both of which were strongly opposed by the sector. Class sizes was announced in May 2012, and led to an embarrassing defeat for the government the following month, after a successful and united campaign by educational organisations, which garnered massive public support. Building on this confidence-boosting show of support, *Stand Up For Kids* was envisaged by the NZEI leadership as a campaign directed at changing the general conversation around education; promoting an alternative vision to the neoliberal, GERM agenda, rather being only centred on resisting a single policy. Further evidence of public support for this vision had been provided through surveys, which also confirmed the ethical imperatives of their teacher membership.

At that conference Pasi Sahlberg spoke about his term the GERM (discussed earlier), and this provided the ideal opportunity for the union to more concretely articulate what this shared vision was opposed to. The leadership team employed a cartoonist to come up with the below grotesque germ cartoon figure, dripping with slime, wearing an insidious grin and carrying a briefcase (see figure 2).



Figure 2: Fight the GERM campaign image.

Fight the GERM website

Figure 2 was taken from a dedicated ‘Fight the GERM’ campaign page (NZEI, 2013). On that page, the image was placed below a description of ‘the antidote’, ‘those fighting to protect a quality public education system which is fair and equitable, based on collaboration and trust’. This vision was juxtaposed against a global, ideologically-driven agenda which deliberately seeks to create crises within public education systems, in order to ‘impose a business model’ (NZEI, 2013, n.p.). The two contrasting educational philosophies were also summarised in a table, reproduced below. The table makes equivalences between the key demands of the shared culture, and those of the antagonist Other, articulating a clear division between two irreconcilable visions for education. Each demand of the Other is horizontally situated next to its ‘antidote’; standardisation is contrasted to personalised learning, competition to trust and professionalism, and so on.

| The GERM | The Antidote |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Standardisation | Personalised Learning |
| Choice | Equity |
| Competition | Collaboration |
| Data-Based Accountability | Trust And Professionalism |

Table 1: The Germ versus the Antidote (NZEI, 2013).

Together with being demands, the list of terms on ‘The Antidote’ side could also be regarded as ethical signifiers. Equity and collaboration in particular fit our earlier definition, as they point to utopian values, which can never be fully captured by normative discourse. As they are ephemeral ideals, we can never actually experience a totally collaborative or fully equitable education system. Much more likely to be experienced conclusively is what constitutes an inequitable and uncollaborative system.

This inherent negativity increases these signifiers’ political potential for systemic change, and imbues the campaign with ethical legitimacy. Hence, such ethical values only become palpable when teachers experience their denial in the classroom, where the policy agenda of the government becomes enacted as constraints on their teaching (Thrupp and White, 2013). Therefore, explicitly juxtaposing these values with those from the common antagonist, the GERM, reflected back to teachers such experiences, increasing the ethical legitimacy of the campaign.

Stand Up For Kids/Fight the GERM placards

This process of articulating an ethically legitimate sense of ‘us’, against a delegitimised ‘them’ was furthered by two-sided placards (figure 3) which the NZEI produced and handed out to their membership, and were then displayed at protests, conferences and school notice boards.



Figure 3: *Stand up for Kids and Fight the GERM placards.*

The placards allowed members and parents to physically perform their identification to the *Stand Up For Kids* campaign,

but also, importantly, their disidentification to *the GERM*. As can be seen, the *Stand Up For Kids* side of the placard incorporated a profusion of images associated with vibrant school life. These images echoed the depiction of diverse vitality in the *Hands Up For Learning* poster, and represented New Zealand's broad curriculum, which includes subjects such as art, science, physical education and music. Hence, the placard could be seen to repeat the concerns of the interviewed school principals around National Standard's threatened narrowing of the curriculum, with its emphasis on the measurement of English and Maths.

Facebook group

The *Stand Up For Kids* public Facebook group was established at the same time as the launch of the campaign, in September 2012, and is still regularly used at the time of writing, with nearly 10,000 members. Members include teachers and interested supporters, thereby facilitating a conversation with a wide audience. The group is administered by the NZEI communications team, who post articles and monitor for inappropriate posts and comments, but all group members are able to post. Hence, the group provided the union an avenue for the engagement of members on the political processes impacting education, while attaining a degree of control over the direction of debates. With a job that is intense, emotionally draining and increasingly pressured, and coming top of family commitments, teachers can otherwise overly rely on their principal or union hierarchy to keep them informed. Facebook groups such as *Stand Up For Kids* offer a more flexible, democratic channel, fitted around busy lifestyles, which teachers can dip into to become more informed on the political issues affecting their work.

Many members also share posts of teaching practice, which exemplify and celebrate shared ethical values. As argued by Brickner (2016), pictures of children undertaking creative projects not directly related to increasing achievement can articulate a 'feminist ethics of care', placing emphasis on the nurturing of relations, together with curiosity, imagination and creativity. The group thus enables the mediated reproduction of the aforementioned shared, holistic teaching culture. Further, such 'articulations act as a form of political dissent and resistance' (Brickner, 2016, p. 12), implicitly rejecting, through their defiant presence, the GERM agenda.

In summary, the well-frequented *Stand Up For Kids* Facebook group offers the NZEI a relatively low-cost empowerment and engagement route, which builds capacity in members and contributes to a more democratic union structure. Rather than representing the agenda of a small leadership group, which is then imposed on the constituency as part of a 'deception' (Arditi, 2010), the concerns raised on the group have emerged from a bottom-up direction, mitigating against the ethical dangers of the populist articulatory logic.

Conclusions

This article has argued that the NZEI teacher union employed a populist articulatory logic in the *Stand Up For Kids: Protect Our Schools/Fight the GERM* media campaign. Following Laclau's theoretical assertion that populism does not necessarily convey right-wing political ideologies, this paper has demonstrated that it is a logic which can also convey a leftist progressive educational politics. While *Hands Up For Learning* formed equivalences between signifiers that represented 'us' and 'them', what made *SUFK/GERM* populist was its articulation of a clear dichotomy, which represented aggregated educational demands as frustrated by a common antagonist (table 1). Those demands found an equivalence through the common element of *being denied* by that antagonist.

However, I also argued that a further common element aided this equivalence. Those demands in table 1 had not simply developed from individual denied claims, but emerged within a collective educational culture, the origins of which can be traced back at least to the early 20th Century (MacDonald, 2016). This culture could also be seen to be reproduced within the earlier *Hands Up For Learning* campaign and bus tour. It is a culture which has continuously privileged the holistic development of the whole child for the benefit of wider society, arguing that the creative autonomy of schools, teachers and students was the best way to achieve that, rather than the measurement of individual achievement. Hence, its ethical signifiers could easily be articulated in direct contrast to the individualizing and competitive logics of neoliberalism (see table 1).

This embeddedness within the ethics of a collective culture provided a feeling of communal ownership, and thus a legitimacy which is usually absent from the business union

model (Weiner, 2012; Brickner, 2016; Popiel, 2015). Hence, I argue that this incorporation of ethical signifiers can mediate against the ethically dangerous elements of the populist logic for the education union activist. Adding further to this mitigation process was the democratic participation offered by the Facebook group. Also importantly, *the GERM* antagonist represented a dominant philosophy, rather than a vulnerable group. This philosophy is of course neoliberalism, causing considerable harm to children's education and teacher's lives on a global scale. Neoliberalism reconstitutes education as an instrument to effect economic growth (Carusi, 2017; Szkudlarek, 2016). It operates with a narrow conception of education which does not only re-purpose public funds to private corporations and de-professionalise teachers, but actually threatens democracies (O'Connor and McTaggart, 2017). Hence, the building of ethically authentic movements which are grounded in the beliefs of their communities and are capable of making links to wider social justice movements are of utmost importance.

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